

## A LITERARY REVIEW OF THE MEDIEVAL ARABIC WRITINGS ON KANEM – BORNO

***Adam Adebayo Sirajudeen, PhD***

Senior Lecturer, Department of Arabic & Islamic Studies, Kogi State University, Anyigba,  
Nigeria

***Dr. Sulayman Adeniran Shittu***

Senior Lecturer, Department of Arabic & Islamic Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria

---

### Abstract

Consequent upon the need of Arab – Muslim rulers to acquire information such as would assist in handling commercial and political relations with some Islamic empires situated at Africa South of Sahara, Arab geography and history developed in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century. Arab geographers, travellers, and traders produced a corpus of literary works in Arabic, which later became the primary source of early African historiography. In spite of the tremendous significance of these Arabic writings, to the reconstruction of African history, with particular reference to Kanem Borno, some limitations abound in the works, borne out of technical reasons. This has made the writings to be scarcely considered for historical materials *sensu stricto*. This paper examines some of the technical problems associated with these literary writings in historiographical perspectives as it relates to Kanem Borno Empire.

---

**Keywords:** Literary Review, Medieval Arabic Writings , Kanem– Borno, sources of African history, reconstruction of history

### Introduction

Historiography is etymologically the compilation, writing, and of course making available of the record of past happenings for the purpose of possible but better understanding of the present. Some other writers will like to see historiography as an art (some would say the science) of writing of history particularly because of the techniques required in the practice of writing history. The word *writing* and or *record* are prominent in the description given above. It presupposes that in discussing historiography, there must be a particular record / writing.

### Problematizing Historiography

The word historiography is a useful compendious expression for describing a group of *activities*, each of which, regarded separately, requires wordy definition, and which in any case should not be regarded as separate and mutually exclusive. By the *activities* we mean certain activities connected with history. The word *history* itself, of course, is one which in both the Arabic and English languages is used with variety of meanings. For instance, history is regarded (and this should be a preliminary definition, which may need cultivation as we proceed) as a record of past happenings. This definition accords reasonably well with the connotation of the Greek root of the modern word in the Western group of the Indo-European languages, and with what is known of the original significance of the roots of the words *akhbar* and *ta'rikh* in the Semitic.

The *activities*, as noted above, which are the component parts of historiography here, refer to 'four different but closely related kinds of historical activity. These are; (i) the *discovery* and critical analysis of *historical sources*; (ii) the *reconstruction* and description of the past on the basis of *facts* quarried from the discovered sources; (iii) the construction on the basis of the ascertained facts of some *general theory*, which gives meaning and inner logic to the known past, or to most of it, as well as serves 'to educate and ascertain society as a whole' or even helps to influence aspects of contemporary public policy or action; and (iv) the *reflection* on the trends and patterns of historical writing<sup>2</sup>.

In a related development, Smith observed that in 1857 there appeared a work by the German historian Droysen entitled *Grundriss der Historik*'. In this work it is maintained that historical study consists of three different types of tasks, which must be carried out in the correct order. First, there is the work of *Heuristik*. That is the collection of sources. There is *Kritik*. That is the testing of sources for reliability, and there is *Hermeneutik*. That is the interpretation of reliable sources for the purpose of constructing a connected and significant narrative<sup>3</sup>. Here, there are some questions which arise, viz; what sort of a record should that be if it must properly serve its purpose? What should it include? And how should one set about compiling it? These questions are, of course all interconnected and the answer to one will partially imply the answer to others and vice versa.

Incidentally, before the period of direct European contact with black Africa, there was little or no art of writing, a situation which made the colonial ideology denied that it was

<sup>2</sup> Afigbo, E. A. The Poverty of African Historiography', unpublished public lecture, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, no date, p. 3

<sup>3</sup> Smith, H.C.F. An Introduction to Historiography, Unpublished paper in the Proceedings of the Sudan Historical Association, September, 1953, p. 10

possible to talk of history let alone its reconstruction of any significant part of black Africa. This ideology, according to them, was based on the dearth of written document, which could be referred to in African historical reconstruction.

The theory of race and its implication of sterility of development and the absence of any form of African history dominated the Europeans' view about Africa right down to the colonial era and even beyond in some cases. For instance, in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Professor Seligman was quoted postulated the obnoxious Hamitic hypothesis, which states that '...the civilizations of Africa are the civilizations of the Hamites'. Seligman's Hamites are made up of the white race, which by broad definition came to include the Arabs<sup>4</sup>. There were other European scholars who shared the same ideology with Seligman that African minds are not productive, but darkness and there was no any development whatsoever in Africa until the coming of the Europeans into the region. Hence, the conclusion was that there was nothing to record of history in the area because darkness is not a subject of history. Hegel, for instance was said to have concluded that 'Africa is not a historical continent. Its people are incapable of either development or education, and as they are seen today so they had always been'. This opinion of Hegel represents the pseudo-scientific theories of the Europeans superiority over Africans.

It was this singular understanding that spurred some notable indigenous historical icons particularly in the modern African historiography to take up the challenge that history could not only be based on written records but the African past could also be reconstructed from oral traditions and archaeological findings. Several African historians have tried to reject in totality the view that Africa had no history before the colonial era and affirm that historical developments and civilizations in pre-colonial Africa were the products of the African genius. Hence, works such as *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta* of Dr. (later Professor) Kenneth O. Dike and *The Egba and Her Neighbours* of Dr. (later Professor) S. O. Biobaku whose timeless achievement lies more in their ideological and methodological innovativeness than in the accuracy of their detailed factual narrative or interpretation<sup>5</sup>.

It is interesting to note here that in discussing the sources of African history, attention has always been drawn to the wealth of Arabic writings as well as local *ta'rikh* by the Arabo-Islamic scholars, whose contributions, though not the only causative factor, but it is certainly one of the most important, pervasive, dynamic, and significant factors that shaped and have continued to shape African history. Other wealth of sources in African history includes oral

---

<sup>4</sup> Folayan Kola 'The Arab Factor in African History, Inaugural Lecture Series, University of Ile Ife, 1983, p. 20

<sup>5</sup> Afigbo, 'The Poverty Op. Cit.

tradition, ethnography, archaeology, palaeo-botany and palaeo-zoology, linguistics, etc as valid for the reconstruction of African history. Incidentally, all these sources are tended to be either ignored or at least frowned upon as not genuine for historical reconstruction.

### **Sources of African Historiography**

Unlike before when history is being synonymous with writing, the more common conception of the subject today is that history is based on evidence. This evidence can only be found in the sources or rather the sources of history are the evidence. It is believed that if there is evidence, there can be history. Sources (which Professor Barraclough referred to as 'imperfect and fragmentary evidence') in historiography are considered basic ingredients in the historiographical activities. This is because; historiographers collect and compile historical facts therein for further interpretation and reconstruction of history. Generally speaking, sources in African Historiography are narrowed down to Oral traditions, written records, and archaeology. These sources are generally categorized as primary, secondary and at times tertiary sources in history. These historical sources are found today in archives where they are collected, treated, and preserved for further works on historical reconstruction. Some other historical materials could also be found in Museums and Monuments where they are housed and protected for further preparation for reconstruction and possibly publication of the findings for the purpose of history.

Most of the sources found either in Archives and Museums are primary ones, which are specifically original, and are therefore more meaningful in the process of using it for historical activity. Among the primary sources are materials such as manuscripts materials, legal cases and reports, treatises and diplomatic dispatches, chronicles, memoirs, diaries, radio tapes and television tapes, artifacts, painting, sculpture, architecture, and tape-recordings of oral history, etc. Historian takes these sources and engage same by converting it into a coherent, intelligible secondary source, whereby wider public, journalist, interested layman, idly curious ones, etc when desirous of getting some information on a particular historical topic, and not having time to consult, let alone search for, the primary sources, will rely on this secondary account. Hence, primary sources constitute major aspects of the historiographical activities. This is because; no historian could be regarded as fully trained and fully competent to interpret the past to others who had not himself worked in primary source materials<sup>6</sup>.

---

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History*, Macmillan Press, London, 1970, p. 136

### Arabic in Africa: An Overview

Africa had had contact with Arabic language prior to the advent of Islam in the continent in the early part of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. As a consequence, the language had wider circulation among the peoples of Africa and later became the official language in some considerable part of the African sub – continent such as Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Libya, and Tunisia, to mention but few.

As early as 9<sup>th</sup> century, Northern Nigeria for instance, attracted the attention of the Arab geographers, travellers, and traders. In their curiosity for intellectualism and particularly for economic purposes, Arab travellers found themselves in these regions writing reports of their experiences. These Arab geographers, travellers and traders in their desire to tap the economic resources of the flourishing Trans Saharan trade for their countries produced a corpus of literary works in Arabic. These Arabic writings cover a wide range of information concerning nations, economic data, social life, international trade as well as merchant routes, religious beliefs and customs, and cosmographies<sup>7</sup>.

It should be pointed out here that the primary purpose of these Arab writings was not for historical documentation, but for political and economic relations between the Arab world and other non-Arab countries. Arab geography developed from the 9<sup>th</sup> century principally in the response to the needs of Muslim ruling classes who were interested in acquiring information such as would assist them in handling commercial and political relations within the vast area in which Islam had established itself. For instance, under the erstwhile Abbasid rule, director of posts *Ṣaḥīb al – barīd* was an important functionary, whose duty was to keep the central government supplied with up – to – date information in regard to routes distances, methods of transport, economic and political conditions within the provinces of the empire<sup>8</sup>. Thus, works such as *Masalik wal Mamalik* (Routes and Kingdom) of al Bakri is a notable example.

It is pertinent to note that the corpus of literary works in Arabic later became the primary source of early African historiography. It contained valuable materials for the reconstruction of some Northern Nigerian states such as Kanem – Borno – it's political and social history where mentioned was made of the king list as well as Hausa states of which Kano chronicle was the most informative. In a word, the Arabic sources are of tremendous significance to the early history of Africa particularly as it covered a period roughly between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century. The Arabic

---

<sup>7</sup> Lewicki, Tadeusz. 'Arabic External Sources for the history of Africa to the South of Sahara', London, Curzon, 1969, p. 8

<sup>8</sup> Hodgkin, Thomas. 'Nigerian Perspectives: An Historical Anthology, OUP, London, 1975, P. 9

literary heritage on Kanem – Borno Travelogues of the itinerant Arab Geographers were later regarded as first hand materials for African historical reconstruction.

It is certainly the case that military and religious conquests have played important roles in the diffusion of languages. With Islamic movement, for instance, Arabic was made the language of non – Arab speakers as it was diffused into many places in Asia and Africa particularly south of Sahara. Considerable Arabic literary writings both in prose and verse were produced by scholars on subjects that cut across their religious disciplinary boundaries such as history, and medicine, apart from the traditional themes of Islamic sciences. A distinct consciousness of history is perceptible in these literary works as several of the writings are of historical value, thus gave rise to the development of historiographical tradition in Africa particularly when there seemed not to be written records.

### **Classification of Materials**

Generally speaking, sources for history of Africa especially in Arabic divide themselves into fairly clearly two principal categories. These are ‘*external*’ and ‘*internal*’. These categories are divided into all written sources derived, roughly speaking, from areas situated to the North of Sahara in North Africa as well as in Europe and Asia. However, into the latter are sources, which have originated in Africa to the South of Sahara.

Some of these sources from Arabic situate to the North of Sahara while some others derive from countries lying to the South of the desert. They can thus be classified as the ‘external’ sources and partly “internal”. The latter consists mainly of chronicles, and other historic works of local origin from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, being the works of the local authors.

Put differently, while the “external” sources refer to those materials produced by the Arab geographers, travellers, and traders as well as other forms of Arab literature, which were provided by the geographers and historians of the Arabo–Islamic world together with a few first-hand accounts such as those given by travellers like Ibn Battutah and Leo Africanus. The Internal sources (category) consist of later Arabic writings by the local indigenous literati most of which the European scholars came to develop.

It must be added here that some other information relating to the black Continent was provided not only by the geographers and travellers, but also by the Arab conquerors. Besides, the intellectual centers of the Islamic caliphate began to be reached by information on the areas situated upon the Nile or the Western Sudan, supplied to the Arab conquerors by the Copts or North African Berbers who had long reached those regions.

It is pertinent to note that the bulk of the Arabic writings which are considered the basic sources of history of the discussed territory from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries belong to the external sources which are not different from the works related entirely to the countries or peoples of Kanem – Borno areas. It is however, instructive to note that Kanem – Borno was known to the Arab geographers and travellers as early as 9<sup>th</sup> century or even earlier. The ruling dynasty was probably converted to Islam at the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Problems and Prospects**

The Arabic writings, which formed the basis of historical materials, were only a few source materials particularly on the subject of Kanem-Borno historical tradition. This is so when compared to the much-documented empires of Ghana, Mali, Songhay lying farther to the West of Sudan. Most of the earliest sources of Nigerian history cover a period roughly between 8<sup>th</sup> / 9<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries are the Arab geographers and travellers' sources. The fact is that there is not a great deal of it with reference to Kanem–Borno. However, available ones will assist to throw more light on the time and people of the area.

Apart from oral tradition and archaeology, Arabic writings constitute a significant source for the history of Africa particularly to the South of Sahara. The bulk of these Arabic writings had hitherto constituted the raw material for Nigerian, nay African historiography. It contained invaluable materials for the reconstruction of some northern Nigerian states such as Kanem – Borno (which is our area of study). These Arabic sources enable us to reconstruct the general image of the communities during a period for which we have no other written records and equally provide some interesting linguistic materials.

In spite of the tremendous significance of the Arabic writings to the reconstruction of African history particularly to the south of Sahara with reference to Kanem–Borno in this study, scholars / historiographers have observed some limitations in these materials, which invariably constitute a kind of problem of authenticity of the writings for historical reconstructions, thus scarcely be considered historical materials *sensu stricto*.

For instance, it has been observed that none of the Arab geographers and travellers who sought to give descriptions of Africa were bound to take account of Kanem as it belonged to Islamic civilization even if remotely. More importantly, none of these geographers / historians before Leo Africanus had first hand knowledge of Kanem. In most cases, their information were based mainly on what could be learned from the Arab

merchants of Kanem pilgrims or scholars who went out in search of knowledge in places like Marrakesh, Tunis, or Cairo<sup>9</sup>.

Besides, the amount of information about our area of study particularly from the external sources are 'sometimes brief and casual, but at other times even quite exhaustive, dispersed in various Arabic works of general character, travellers' reports, geographical treaties, historical works, cosmographies or cyclopedias'<sup>10</sup>. In most cases, it is observed that the bulk of the news or historical information from these scholars were only collections by the authors from various travellers, seamen, merchants, pilgrims as mentioned earlier who were presumed to have had first hand information about these regions. They are mostly recast of original character and compilations of older narrations from different sources of various epochs which pose the problem of interpretation.

No wonder, Lewicki observed, that some information coming, for instance, from the 9<sup>th</sup> century, recurrently reappears in the Arabic sources of a later epoch, frequently reaching, under a more or less deformed shape, up to the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century. This circumstance has frequently made the African research students particularly those who are not conversant with the Arabic language or the problems of Arabic sources, assume a distrustful attitude to that particular category of sources<sup>11</sup>.

While it is clearly important to have a thorough knowledge of the origin, antiquity, authenticity, and reliability of historical traditions of Kanem–Borno embedded in Arabic writings of the scholars up to the c. 19<sup>th</sup>, a historiographical study of these historical materials as well as their writers is more than necessary. There is need to examine these literary writings as a whole, paying close attention to the period when each work was composed, to the authenticity of each text, and to what are original materials in it and what was drawn from the previous works.

While it is believed in some quarters that Arabic literature is particularly hospitable to comparative studies, by reason of its long history and close ties with other world literature – ancient, medieval and modern- some writers would still want us to believe that the study of Arabic literature has suffered from lack of competent comparative studies, as whole areas

---

<sup>9</sup> Oyeweso, S. 'Values & Limitations of Early Arabic Accounts in the Reconstruction of Nigerian History', *Islamic Culture, India*, vol. LXII, No.1, Jan. 1988, p. 9

<sup>10</sup> Lewicki, Op. Cit. P. 9

<sup>11</sup> Lewicki, Tadeusz. 'Arabic External Sources for the history of Africa to the South of Sahara', London, Curzon, 1969, p. 11



have been left particularly untouched, in spite of their vital importance to the history of world civilization and the development of modern Arabic thought<sup>12</sup>.

### **Historical Problems of the Arabic Writings**

For the sake of convenience, our examination of the Medieval Arabic writings on the subject of Kanem-Borno shall be based on the general divisions of the sources 'External' and 'Internal'. The division, which is founded upon geographical criteria is convenient and does not give rise to doubt as to which category should be included. This is due to the fact that outside world as identified by earlier geographers and travellers of the Arab world. In addition, it seemed justifiable to include some of the earlier references from the Arab sources as relating to the area.

It is however, pertinent to state here that not much of these external sources in particular are to hand, as some are only known by their mention in some other related works and are not extant any more. Nevertheless, the available ones at hand are pointer to the fact that the essential information needed particularly on our area of study are guaranteed since not all these external sources have information on Kanem-Borno especially at that earlier age.

Historiographers have relied on these geographical writings even in establishing the antiquity of origins of some traditions of origin. Abdullahi Smith's pioneer research, for instance, on the reconstruction of the intellectual history of the Nigerian peoples dwelt on the interpretation of the traditions of the Sayfuwa of Kanem-Borno.

In what Smith considered fragmentary and tentative contribution to the study of tradition of origin of one of the longest dynasty so far in the Central Sudan, he started by casting doubt on the authenticity of the Sayfuwa being of Himyarite origin. While begging to disagree with the inductive methods of the Western scholarship particularly the position taken by late Sir Richmond Palmer who attributed these traditions 'to old Borno court's desire for a Yemenite pedigree and imaginary sojourn of their ancestors in Arabia'<sup>13</sup>. Smith depended solely on the information about the Sayfuwa descendants from the popular hero i.e. Sayf b.Dhi Yazan, according to Arab geographer such as al Bakri writing in the mid 11<sup>th</sup> century. He equally cited other Arab travellers like Ibn Sa'id al Maghribi (writing in the mid 13<sup>th</sup> century), Abul Fida (early 14<sup>th</sup> C.), al 'Umari (mid 14<sup>th</sup> C.) and al – Maqrizi (early 15<sup>th</sup> C.)<sup>14</sup>.

Whilst citing Smith's sources of information with which he was justifying the authenticity of the descent of Sayfuwa is not our concern here, we wish however, to point out

<sup>12</sup> Shukry Ayyad 'On Criticism & Creativity', in *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, No. 4. Spring, 1984, P. 113.

<sup>13</sup> Bala, *et al* (eds.) 'Studies in Pre Colonial Borno', NNPC, Zaria, 1983, P. 20

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. P. 21

the significance of the Arabic writings of these early geographers as well as historians of the period particularly in their historical literature. It is on this note that Smith was trying to authenticate the antiquity of the tradition of the origin of the Sayfuwa, for example.

A cursory look at the sources from which this pioneer historiographer based his argument, according to him, indicates that it left much to be desired considering the time when the materials relating to the information was, at least, six to seven centuries away from the life time of the hero in question. Hence, there is need to prove the reliability of the information and trace them to the time when the hero lived. In doing this, Smith admitted, that there is no means of establishing such antiquity or authorship of those historical traditions cited. This is because, considering the fact that facilities of preserving information were not at their disposal, in the same way as it is difficult for us nowadays, with all the facilities at our disposal, to be certain about things which happened 700 years before our time<sup>15</sup>.

In solving this thorny issue, Smith simply referred to what he described as ‘the general idea about the history of the world,’ which prevailed in their days and moreover accorded extremely well with an established body of known facts about the African past<sup>16</sup>. He thus, concluded that these Arab geographers were familiar with the Classical Arabic literature as well as that of the historical traditions of the Muslim scholars who derived them from the Scriptures.

In spite of the invaluable significance of the Arabic geographical sources by these scholars from 9<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, one would not be surprised to see that, like any other sources of history, these Arabic sources have their own limitations. These limitations had attracted the attention of the African historiographers that much ink has spilt over the problem of authenticity of the materials.

So far there have been relatively little critical appraisal or detailed analysis of these external sources over the past century and a half. Nonetheless, the attempts by scholars in their pioneering role must be saluted. Among the brilliant examples, here are the works of scholars like Professor John Hunwick of Northwestern University, whose critical and systematic approach to these materials had served as an eye opener to this thorny issue. In reviewing the known Arabic sources for African history, Hunwick equally tried to review some of the problems in interpreting these materials as they relate to the reconstruction of African historiography to the south of Sahara. His particular focus on these Arabic external

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Bala, *et al* (eds.) ‘Studies in Pre Colonial Borno’, NNPC, Zaria, 1983, P.

sources was on the works of the Spanish – Arab geographer, al Bakri (1067), Ibn Sa'īd al Maghribi (1269), Ibn Battutah (1369), and al Maqrizi.

Regardless of the tremendous significance of the accounts of Saharan and sub – Saharan Africa, which were found in a number of different types of Arabic works, it was observed that not all of the authors have their aim to impart geographical or ethnographic knowledge. While those who have such pretensions depended severally on the Book of Geography of Batalmayus al Quludhi i.e. Claudian or Claudius Ptolemaics of Alexandria. Their writings sometimes may be no more than repetitions of what has been in earlier works. Worse still is the mixing up of the names of places particularly during their rendering into Arabic.

Ibn Sa'īd al Maghribi, the 13<sup>th</sup> C. writer, for instance, quoted passages from an otherwise unknown travelogue by one Ibn Fatima relating to Lake Chad area, whose account probably related to Kanem – Borno. In such a situation, historiographers used to express fear that such information should be treated with caution in order not to fall into error of what could be described as historical metaphor in the use of these data. One example of this is al Maqrizi, citing an unknown authority while narrating that the ruler of Kanem - Borno invaded a region<sup>17</sup>. It is also noted that most of these Arab geographers and travelers' accounts are not first hand information. Writers like al 'Umari (wrote 1337) were mere armchair encyclopedist from whom only a small handful of truly first hand accounts of sub – Saharan African could be gleaned<sup>18</sup>.

Though not quoting directly from Ptolemy as did Khawarizmi, the Andalusian scholar (wrote in 1067) Abu 'Ubayd al Bakri in his popular *Kitab al Masalik wal Mamalik* ( Book of Routes and Kingdoms) made use of the work of one al Warraq, i.e. a North African geographer of the previous century. Besides, this Spanish Arab geographer drew extensively on oral accounts of merchants who had visited West Africa.

Perhaps one of the most influential of all Arab geographers, both on Arab writers and later European geographers was al Sharif al idrisi, who wrote his universal geography *Nuzhat al Mushtaq fi ikhtiraq al afaq* (A Pleasure trip for who longs to Penetrate Distant Lands). It is noted that the basis of his literary works on physical geography of Africa is also Ptolemy. However, the Arab writers on the hydrography of West Africa have influenced him in some ways, even though he does not mention writers such as al Bakri among his source<sup>19</sup>.

---

<sup>17</sup> Hunwick, J. O. 'Arabic Sources for African History', unknown source, p. 220

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 221

<sup>19</sup> Trimingham, J .S. 'A History of Islam in West Africa' OUP, London, 1969, P. 1

It is characteristic features of the Arab geographers and travellers to repeat without question most of their information either from the merchants who had visited the places or the earlier writers from where the information was gotten. For instance, one finds the Arab cartographers' failure to correct Ptolemy's information some of which may not be in order.

It is important to note that the period beginning from the fall of Baghdad in 1259 and ending with the Napoleonic invasion in Egypt in 1798 is generally regarded by scholars as one of decline in the quality of Arabic literature. This was due to the preponderance of *imitation* and *compilation* during the period where a number of scholars scattered here and there over the period who produced dictionaries, local and universal histories, commentaries and so on. It should be noted that while some of these works have contributed to our knowledge of that period and have helped to preserve valuable historical materials, which would otherwise have been lost, many of them were characterized by lack of originality. This is because, having been copied and assembled without any serious attempt to evaluate the materials, and often without acknowledgement of the sources of these materials<sup>20</sup>.

All these considerations mentioned above concerning the limitations of the literary works of the Arab geographers and historians, which relate to the Arabic external sources for the history of Central *Bilad al Sudan* present the problem of getting thorough knowledge of the image of sub – Saharan Africa. It also allows historians to be skeptical and sound a note of caution in using any of these sources as historical data owing to their lack of authenticity and reliability of facts contained. It equally illustrates some of the problems of interpretation.

Registering his acknowledgement of the invaluable significance of the records of the Arab Muslim historians in Arabic, Trimingham could not hide his skepticism in identifying limitations in the information contained in these Arabic sources. He said: for the earlier period there are scattered notices provided by the geographers and historians of the Islamic world, together with a few first hand accounts such is that given by Ibn Battutah<sup>21</sup>.

The above example is an illustration of the problem associated with the writings of the Arab historians, which were not only scattered information but not first hand accounts. This has posed a problem of authenticity and reliability of these accounts to be considered for historical reconstruction.

Just as earlier on alluded to in the observation of Hunwick and other critics of these writings, most of the information gathered by these scholars are not only often confusing but

---

<sup>20</sup> I.A. Ogunbiyi, 'The Poet Mahmud Sami al Barudi's Contribution to modern Arabic Poetry' in *Al Fikr: Journal of the Department of Arabic & Islamic Studies, University of Ibadan*, Vol. III, No. 1, Dec. 1982, P. 5

<sup>21</sup> Trimingham, J. S. 'A History ... Op. Cit. P. 108

were unquestioned repetitions of the earlier writers. For example, geographers like al Khawarizmi depended solely upon Ptolemy and would place African names at random within his framework<sup>22</sup>. Subsequent writers, as noted earlier, depended primarily upon literary information and their materials were compiled indiscriminately with little regard to the date and value of their sources, which they sometimes mention but often omit. They rarely discriminate between different categories of information, incorporating materials drawn from sources written perhaps centuries earlier with information derived, probably at second or third hand, from a contemporary traveler. The result is that it is often difficult to decide to what period a particular observation relates.

It is true that the Arab geographers and historians helped tremendously to penetrate the African past a little, but a little. This is because they were mostly interested in the African trade and commerce. They only list names of many peoples and villages; but of the life of even of those they saw they tell us a little. Hence, sources being limited in this way to the Arab historians and writers have tended to bias historians to regarding the materials with caution.

Trimingham in his comment on the sources of history of Central Sudan observed that early history of the area and the beginning of the penetration of Islam on the region are even more obscure compared to that of Western Sudan. Worse still is the fact that the information by the Arab writers are no more than historical myth distorted by reflection through a thousand mirrors. The information by the Arab scholars was not only meager but vaguest idea<sup>23</sup>.

The Polish scholar Tadeusz Lewicki has been active in the critical appraisal and analysis of the Arabic external sources in the history of Africa south of Sahara. In his attempt to gather materials on various writings for the history of Africa, his mini – encyclopedia *West African Food in the Middle Ages According to Arabic sources* as well as his treatise / book on *Arabic External sources for the history of Africa to the South of Sahara* are brilliant texts on the topic.

In the latter text, Lewicki concerned himself with the Arabic external sources which according to him, he ‘considered to be the basic sources for the history of the central Sudan between 8 and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries; i.e. in the age preceding the Portuguese discoveries<sup>24</sup>. Lewicki, like other historiographers could not fail to recognize the invaluable historical material for the

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. P. 108

<sup>23</sup> Trimingham, J. S. ‘A History ... Op. Cit. P. 108

<sup>24</sup> Lewicki, Op. Cit. P. 7

reconstruction of history of some kingdoms in the sub – Saharan Africa embedded in the literary writings of the Arab geographers and historians.

In his systematic approach to the study of historical materials, Lewicki started by answering question that ‘at what time did the Arab world and its scholars began taking interest in these areas?. More importantly and relevant to our study here is the question what was the way through which information on them reached the intellectual centre of the Arabic countries?’<sup>25</sup>.

He noted that the information from these writers came partly as a ‘result of their personal observations and not their practical experiences or eye – witness. The implication of this is that substantial part of their information are but collections by the authors comprising various travellers, seamen, and merchants who must have visited the areas whose history is narrated<sup>26</sup>. Besides, it is noted that in most cases, reference may not be made of these informants in the works of the geographers and historians and where it is made, they are mostly anonymous. It presupposes that only a portion of those sources has an original character, while the majority of the information on the African countries and its peoples are not more than recasts of older relations or compilations of different sources and epochs<sup>27</sup>.

One brilliant example of this is the excellent description of Negro land contained in a work by Abu °Ubayd al Bakri (11<sup>th</sup>) and nearly as interesting geographical treatise of al Idrisi (12<sup>th</sup> c.). It is interesting to note that the two works, though used by many historians of Africa particularly in the earlier epochs are not always so original<sup>28</sup>. The first more ‘accurate’ information on the lands and people of West Africa and Central Sudan, which could be found in the work of the eminent historian and Persian geographer al \_Ya°qubi was said to lack reliability because, he never visited Africa to the South of Sahara. His report was founded exclusively upon information collected in Egypt and perhaps from Maghrib as well as from various travellers and merchants whose names he did not disclose<sup>29</sup>.

In the same vein, among the most eminent Arabic historian as well as prominent traveller was Abu Husayn al Mas°udi. This Baghdad scholar visited many places and wrote extensively as he concerned himself with history, geography and natural sciences. Incidentally, only two of his several works survived till date one of which is the popular *Muruj al Dhahab wa ma°adin al Jawhar* (The Book of Golden Meadows and of the Mines of

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. P. 40

<sup>26</sup> Lewicki, Op. Cit. P. 8

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, P. 8

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, P. 8

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, P. 9

Precious Stones), the other being his historico – geographical study bearing the title *Kitab al Tanbih wal Ishraf* (Book of Warnings and Control).

It is however, instructive to note that al Mas'udi's works contained a lot of information on Africa to the South of Sahara except that some of them are derived from the authors' personal observation and others from various sources, both written and oral. It is equally noteworthy that most of this information is reports from diverse travellers, whose names are mostly omitted<sup>30</sup>. For instance, the author of *Muruj al Dhahab* did not mention where information is derived. A brilliant example is the alleged origin of the Nubian kings said to come from the Yemenite tribe of Himyarite as he probably mixed up Nubia with Abbysinia<sup>31</sup>.

In the popular *Kitab Surat al ard* by the traveller and geographer Ibn Hawqal, scholars observed that the bulk of data concerning Africa to the South of Sahara are recast of Greek Ptolemy's work<sup>32</sup>. More importantly, Ibn Hawqal was said to have been influenced by a geographer of the mid tenth century i.e. al Hitachi from whose geographic treaty he must have studied, which stimulated his writings. Hence, Ibn Hawqal work is but a recast of the geographic treaty by this *al Ishtikhri* while information concerning the African countries, Spain and Sicily are perfectly original and founded upon the authors personal observation or upon information acquired by him during his travels through this countries.

In spite of these immense contributions of the historians, Oyeweso noted that like any other sources of historical information, these Arabic sources have its limitations. For example, like other scholars have observed, most of the Arab geographers and travellers did not obtain first hand information in particular on the regions they wrote about. Scholars and historians like al Khawarizmi and al Idrisi's works were mere recasts of earlier writers such as the Greek Ptolemy on whose work they were indebted. In addition, as alluded to earlier, that none of these scholars had first hand knowledge of Kanem – Borno in particular before the 16<sup>th</sup> c. when the Moorish scholar, Leo Africanus came to write about the area. This was corroborated by Hunwick.

Hence, historians are cautious while using any of these materials for historical reconstruction as there is need for knowledge of not only the circumstances surrounding the documents but also prevailing atmosphere at the time of the writing. More importantly is the textual criticism of the documents.

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, P. 21

<sup>31</sup> Lewicki, Op. Cit. P. 40

<sup>32</sup> Hunwick, J. O. Op. cit Arabic Sources ...P. 217

Among the early works of Arab geographers are that of al – Ya<sup>c</sup>qubi and al – Bakri i.e. *Kitab al Masalik wal Mamalik* published in 1067. Others include *Mu<sup>c</sup>jam al Buldan* of Yaqut, *Kitab al Istiqsa* of al Nasiri, *Kitab Bast al ard fi tul wal <sup>c</sup>Ard* of Ibn Sa<sup>c</sup>id al Maghribi, al <sup>c</sup>Umari's *Masalik al absar fi Mamalik al Amsar*, *al Khitāt* of al Maqrizi, etc. It should be noted that Kanem first appeared in some of the external written sources (9thc.) of the Arab geographers such as al Ya<sup>c</sup>qubi.

While these writings have information, that al <sup>c</sup>Umari, for instance, in his *Masalik al absar fi Mamalki al amsar* must have 'taken from a great deal of his information from earlier writers such as Ibn Sa<sup>c</sup>id al Maghribi. This is contained in *Bibliothèque Nationale*, mss no 5868, Paris. We should not forget that as mentioned earlier, historiographers have sounded a note of caution in using any information contained in the works of Ibn Sa<sup>c</sup>id himself as there are copious materials he collected unquestioned from other writers most of who were anonymous like the obscure author – 'Ibn Fatimah'. Another typical example cited by Alkali here was al Maqrizi whose work has a great deal of information on Egyptian history while reference to Kanem in his *al Khitāt* mostly relied on the information got from other geographers and travelers like Ibn Sa<sup>c</sup>id and al <sup>c</sup>Umari.

## Conclusion

In spite of the tremendous significance of these Arabic writings to the reconstruction of early African history particularly, the south of Sahara, scholars of historiography observed some limitations in it, which invariably constitute a kind of problem of authenticity of these materials for historical reconstruction. This has presented a problem of getting correct and authentic source materials, which are reliable not only for the historical reconstruction but also for the purpose of the Arabic literary history of Nigeria in particular.

As noted earlier, most of the Arab geographers and travellers before Leo Africanus, who sought to give descriptions of Africa south of Sahara, did not have first hand knowledge of these regions such as Kanem. They based their accounts mainly on what could be learnt from other Arab merchants or Kanem pilgrims or scholars in places like Marrakesh, Tunis, or Cairo. Perhaps, because their primary objective of these writings was not historical documentation, most of the early Arabic writings on Nigeria and some other parts of Southern Sahara particularly Kanem – Borno lacked the idea of objectivity in historical writing. Scholars accused them of partisanship in the selection of facts as well as some other factors, which may lead historical records into error in terms of interpretation of events.



The fact that the primary objects of the Arab geographers' writings was the response to the needs of Muslim rulers or ruling classes who were interested in acquiring information such as assist them in handling commercial and political relations within the vast area in which Islam has established itself must have accounted for the characteristics feature of their writings.

However, regardless of the fact that many of these information collected have their limitations as truncated and incomplete as observed in the preceding pages by some historiographers, yet they allow for reconstruction of general history of the area – people or community – during a particular period for which there was no particular written records. This justification notwithstanding, the limitations allow for the problem of authenticity of these materials for reconstruction of African history.

Many scholars have attempted to extract information from the texts of Arab geographers and travellers; they have generally not examined the relative importance of each of the author within the Arab geographical tradition, nor have they properly considered the relationships of the author to another. They have thus often treated the Arab texts as a block of materials from which information might be extracted about the area for any period before the European age.

## References :

- Ajayi, J. F. Ade *et al* (eds.) History of West Africa, vol.1, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Longman, New York, 1976.
- Bala, *et al* (eds.) Studies in Pre- Colonial Borno, Zaria, NNPC, 1983, p. 20
- Hitti, Philip K. A History of the Arabs, London, 1953.
- Hodgkin, Thomas Nigerian Perspectives: An Historical Anthology, OUP, London, 1975.
- Lewicki, Tadeusz. Arabic External Sources for the history of Africa to the South of Sahara, London, Curzon, 1969,
- Nichola, Z. *al Jughrafiyah wal rihlat 'indal 'Arab*, Beirut; *Maktabah al madrasah wa daral kitab al Lubnani*, 1962.
- Palmer, H. R. (Tr.) 'Introduction Twelve Years of Reign of al Mai Idrees Alawma', London, OUP.1930 Lagos.
- Trimingham, J. S. A History of Islam in West Africa, London, OUP, 1962.
- Bivar, *et al* 'The Arabic Literature of Africa to 1804: A provisional Account', BSOAS, vol.

XXV, 1962

Hall, K. R. Review of ‘A Study of the Arabic Texts Containing Materials on South East Asia’ in *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 40, No.2, February 1980

Hunwick, J. O. ‘Arabic Sources for African History’ unknown source

Ogunbiyi, I. A. ‘The Poet Mahmud Sami al Barudi’s Contribution to Modern Arabic Poetry’, in *Al Fikr* – Journal of the Department of Arabic & Islamic Studies, University of Ibadan, vol. III, No.1, Dec. 1982

Oyeweso, Siyan “Values and Limitations of Early Arabic Accounts in the Reconstruction of Nigerian History’, *Islamic Culture, India*, vol. LXII, No.1, Jan. 1988.

Alkali, M. N. ‘Kanem – Borno under the Sayfuwa: A Study of Origin, Growth and Collapse of a Dynasty,’ PhD Thesis, ABU, 1978.